

The Mediatization of the Resilience Frame: A New Understanding of Wildfires in the Spanish Mainstream Media (2017–2021)



Enric Castelló

Abstract This book chapter offers a media frame analysis on forest fires in the Spanish mainstream media. Three of the most important newspapers are studied in relation to the presence of two media frames: the suppression frame and the resilience frame. After inspecting news and opinion pieces about wildfires during the last five years (2017–2021), the author identifies that the resilience frame is gaining prominence in the media. This interpretative frame emphasizes a discourse of climate change and management transition in which the need of new policies and measures are at the centre of the story, as opposed to the suppression frame treatment of fire as a “fight” or even a “war”. The chapter ends by pointing out some challenges that this resilience frame confronts in the face of a mediatization of wildfires and an increasing presence of specialized sources pointing out the complexities of fires in a more reflective manner.

Keywords Media coverage · Wildfire mediatization · Framing wildfires · Resilience narratives · Risk communication · Rural agency

1 Introduction

The media coverage of wildfires has increased during the last five years. During this time, spectacular and uncontrollable wildfires have hit places such as California (2018, 2020, 2021), Australia (2019), Brazil (2019) and Chile (2017), affecting wild–urban interfaces. Fires have also become a major media issue in the Mediterranean countries, especially after severe episodes in Portugal (2017), Greece (2017, 2021) and Turkey (2021). Some of these were labelled “superfires”, or 6th generation fires, a technical reference to several elements (including vegetation continuum or global warming) that provoke fire storms and special conditions making them impossible to extinguish with human resources.

E. Castelló (✉)
Department of Communication Studies, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain
e-mail: enric.castello@urv.cat

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Spain is on the list of countries that have faced this new reality. Spain's firefighting division is regarded by policymakers as one of the best-equipped and most experienced in Europe (EFEVerde, 2019). But the new context requires the fire strategy to be rethought worldwide so that the focus on extinction and suppression shifts to a focus on resilience. This involves the ability to prepare for fire, to adapt landscapes and to sensitize societies to understand that suppression is not enough to respond to the new sort of superfires. The paradigm requires a new public explanation of fire. However, society's understanding of complex issues does not change overnight. This is particularly true when the general public is not prepared for a narrative to be suddenly disrupted, which is the case of Spain, where the paradigm of "fighting the fire" has been hegemonic since the middle of the last century (Seijo, 2009b, Gonzalez-Hidalgo et al., 2014).

However, in recent years, and for various reasons, a new resilience frame has permeated the Spanish public sphere. In this book chapter, we explore how this has happened and we will discuss how these renewed understandings of wildfires must rise to the challenges in the media. The starting hypothesis of the research was that in the last five years, a new discourse of resilience has been occupying mainstream media in parallel to an intense process of the mediatization of wildfires. To check this hypothesis, we tracked three mainstream newspapers for five years, exploring the contest between the two frames (extinction and resilience). We will present how the process evolved, how resilience threatens the hegemonic position of extinction and the challenges that resilience communication faces within this process.

2 Theoretical Backgrounds

Our research relies on media frame theory. The meaning of "resilience" for scientists and social agents has changed during the last decade, due to social understandings of "failed attempts of control" (McGreavy, 2016, 117). In the Spanish case, the suppression frame became hegemonic when, as Francisco Seijo holds (2009a, 2009b), it was sponsored by the government during the dictatorship (1939–1975), policies of reforestation (with single species) and afforestation were implemented, and country folk were encouraged to migrate to cities. This was at the origin of the state-sponsored discourse of fire as "the enemy". Seijo (2009a, 116) claimed that in the 1980s and 1990s, the suppression frame was revamped to digest environmentalism and address the new eco-regionalist and urban public. The epitome of this strategy was the well-remembered campaign entitled "Todos contra el fuego" (All of us against fire), which added an activist aesthetic to the state's objectives so that they became a sort of demonstration involving urban people, farmers, and celebrities.¹ The suppression frame was also popular in the press, which propagated its main features.

¹ This institutional campaign is available at <https://youtu.be/RqWwHEEdc4o>.

According to González-Hidalgo et al. (2014), the resilience discourse about wildfires started to circulate in Catalonia at the end of the 1990s, after two summers of destruction and the tragic fire of Horta de Sant Joan, led by the Grup de Recolzament d'Actuacions Forestals (Forest Action Support Group) (GRAF),² and particularly by the figure of Marc Castellou. They differentiated the resilience discourse from the capitalist, the green and the rural idyll discourses. The resilience frame has a greater technical and scientific component, due to the considerable advances in forest science in recent decades. To understand the rise of resilience as a discourse, we need to consider the advanced levels of the mediatization of wildfires it is being fuelled by. This mediatization involves not only the proliferation of media discourse about wildfires but also the transformation of the institutions that adapt and adopt media logic. Social and cultural mediatization is mostly related to this notion of transformation of institutions, organizations, and structures (Fredriksson et al., 2015; Hjarvard, 2008; Krotz, 2009). It is also a process that has an impact on the constitution of media frames (Castelló, 2012; de Vreese, 2014). It is a two-way relation: mediatization requires organizations and institutions to go beyond adopting media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979) so that they can respond to these logics by injecting media content and formats with their conceptions of the world. The process works, for example, by putting firefighter commanders in front of the cameras to explain a situation, or digesting scientific output in graphs and pictures to be aired or published in the media. On the other hand, media treatment itself causes changes in the frames, whether they are sponsored by political, scientific or non-expert sources. For example, complexities that are difficult to explain in the media can be discarded because of technical limitations, aspects closer to the editorial line can be focused on, etc.

Although there are a wide variety of discourses and we are aware of the danger of dichotomizing the richness of the narratives available to us, we have decided to track the confrontation of a still hegemonic suppression frame, which still has a lot of life left in it as we shall see, and the emergence of a resilience frame in the media. We use Robert Entman's scheme (1993) to identify its framing elements. The *suppression frame* conceives fire as a disruptive catastrophe, a disaster. In particular, the frame explains fire in terms of individual causation (Castelló & Montagut, 2019). The media will likely report on criminal prosecution, imprudence and fatalities. As part of the construction of the frame, the story of suppression also uses metaphors and other rhetorical figures. This discourse also includes metaphors articulating FIRE AS A MONSTER (Matlock et al., 2017) or as an evil living creature to be defeated. It also focuses on the suppression and extinction themselves, with particular emphasis on the methods used, the number of firefighters, trucks, helicopters, etc., and details about the institutions taking part (regional, national, etc.). Therefore, the issue is also politicized, as it was in Greece (Hovardas, 2014; Karyotakis, 2021). The suppression frame incorporates political responsibility, although it focuses not on policies of prevention or aid for the area and affected farmers. Local people are seen as passive evacuees or as victims in dramatized stories.

² Special section of Cos the Bombers de Catalunya (Corps of Firefighters of Catalonia).

In contrast, the resilience frame considers fires as natural phenomena we have to live with and claims that the strategy of “fighting” is limited and can be counterproductive. According to this frame, forests are habitats that need to be managed with innovative techniques such as prescriptive burns and traditional methods such as fuel thinning and sustainable and planned grazing mostly by extensive farming and shepherds’ activities. This discourse is masterfully expressed in documents by institutions such as the Forest Sciences Centre of Catalonia and the Pau Costa Foundation, which point out the importance of prescribed burnings or so-called “good fires” (controlled, small) to prevent “bad fires” (out of control, huge). Though the resilience frame is grounded in technical understandings of fire behaviour, it also relativizes a single technological response for suppression and activates pedagogical and sociocultural tools for prevention (Ballart et al., 2016a, 2016b; Plana et al., 2016). This frame also uses a set of lexical markers, including technical and prescriptive burnings, burnt patches, agroforest mosaics, or forestry works and management. The personification or use of metaphors on fire articulates a discourse that WILDFIRES ARE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING) TO BE UNDERSTOOD. In this discourse, local people are part of the solution because they actively help to prevent and avoid exposure to megafires.

Having described both discourses, to conclude this theoretical approach, we remark on the links between discourse and action, and therefore transformation. In this respect, we find particularly appropriate to consider framing as a process that projects vectors for social transformation (Castelló, 2019). Under this rationale, the role of the media (including social networks, campaigning, grassroots media production, etc.) is at the core of resilience production processes and organizational change. In that sense, we agree with those authors that consider that the media are crucial if social and political responses to wildfires are to be enhanced, so that “pathways to resilience in socioecological systems” can be found (Moritz et al., 2014).

3 Methodological Note

In this book chapter, a textual analysis was used to assess the presence and importance of the resilience frame in the media. The corpus consisted of the materials published in the *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2021 containing the expressions *incendio(s) forestal(es)* (forest fire(s)).³ After duplicates and non-relevant materials were discarded, the search produced a corpus of 656 pieces. We analysed the corpus using the qualitative data analysis tool Atlas.ti (22.2.0, Berlin, Germany) and applied a codification to test the presence of the resilience frame.

³ The search engine database used was Factiva. According to the data available from Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, and after discarding the two leading Sports dailies (Marca and AS), these are the most read newspapers in Spain in 2020. Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/436643/most-read-newspapers-in-spain/>.

Table 1 Summary of subcodes

Suppression	Resilient
<i>Fight</i> : the story remarks on the fighting towards wildfires	<i>Resistance</i> : the story focuses on the resilience of nature and species
<i>Politization</i> : political dispute and political reactions during the crisis. short-term aids	<i>Policing</i> : policies proposed, organized actions. Long-term investment
<i>Individual causation</i> : focus on single causes (e.g. arsonist)	<i>Structural causation</i> : focus on structural issues (e.g. global warming)
<i>Low agency of locals</i> : neighbours as victims	<i>High agency of locals</i> : neighbours as agents
<i>Neutral/Transversal elements</i> : elements focusing on risk (e.g. during heat waves) or the damages caused by the fire (human, material, natural)	

Source author

We used four categories: resilience, suppression, both-relevant and no-framed. The frames were identified with the subcodes expressed in Table 1. The category of both-relevant contained pieces with a mixed, complex story using both frames, whilst no-framed covered an issue beyond our scope. After testing the codes, we read all the pieces and evaluated each of them. The length of the pieces was not considered. To be assigned to a frame, the pieces should contain at least one feature considered to be a subcode and display the frame, albeit partially, throughout the textual device. We examined up to 2662 quotations within the pieces, and we took notes and worked on memos until each piece was balanced and allocated to one of the previous categories.

When the piece mixed both frames, with textual devices in quantity and quality, it was labelled as both-relevant. This label was restricted to relatively long items containing elements from both frames, with arguments and devices that activated both understandings of the discourse. Not all the pieces were assigned to a frame. Topics and ideas related to risk, warnings or precautionary measures at critical moments or fire damage were considered to be neutral because they can be articulated equally in both understandings and rationales. Although the big picture was portrayed by quantitative data, it was the qualitative analysis that more clearly reflects how the discourse of suppression stands in the media.

4 Results

The coverage of wildfires (Fig. 1) shows that there were more news items in the years with more incidents (2017, 2019 and 2021). However, other issues also deserve to be mentioned. For example, the years 2020 and 2021 were quite similar in terms of the number of fires (2671 and 2914, respectively), and even though there were more big fires in 2020 than in 2021 (19 and 18, respectively) (Centro de Coordinación de la Información Nacional sobre Incendios Forestales, 2021), the data reveal a greater focus in the last year. *El País* was the newspaper that paid the most attention

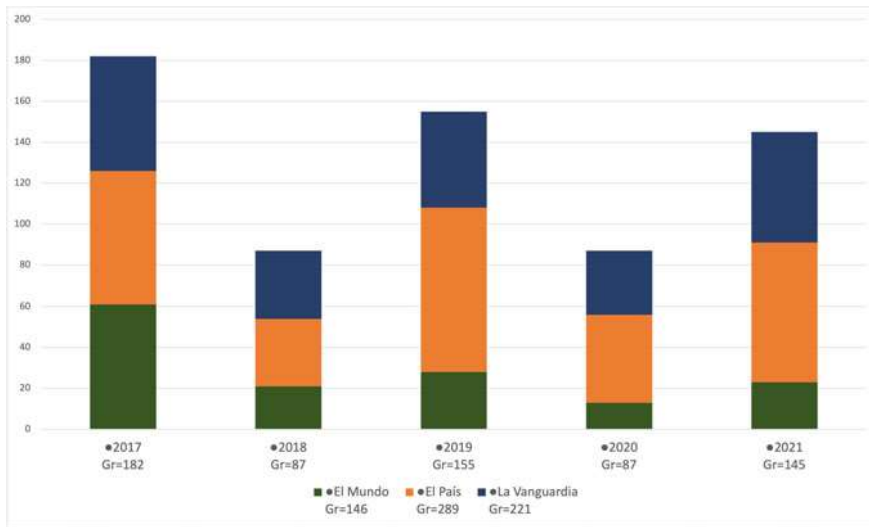


Fig. 1 Coverage of wildfires in the newspapers, 2017–2021 ($n = 656$)

to the topic, followed by *La Vanguardia* and *El Mundo*. Also important was the competition in the media from other issues (e.g. Covid-19) or the nature of the big fires (for example, the availability of images, or the newsworthiness of the details, such as human casualties). However, as it shall discuss below, the “how” is here even more interesting than the “how many”.

4.1 *Fight and Resistance*

Our hypothesis was confirmed. Over time, the resilience frame (in green, Fig. 2) has been taking a bigger piece of the media cake. It is worth mentioning that it was in 2021 when the resilience framework of wildfires accounted for more than one-quarter of all media stories (26%), despite having once been a very small percentage (8%). It is also noteworthy that the number of “Both-relevant” stories also peaked in 2021 (12%). Together, resilience and both-relevant frames gathered momentum at the end of the five years. In low-coverage years (2018 and 2020), fewer fires were covered from the perspective of suppression and no-framed stories were more important. This is consistent with the consideration that wildfires are a secondary, not a primary issue. The norm is that “more fires” leads to more coverage using the suppression frame.

Both the suppression and resilience frames articulate stories about “Fire damage”, which include passages about hectares affected or people evacuated. Destruction and injuries, in this sense, are common ground in any story about wildfire. It is also worth noting that the resilience discourse does not adapt so easily to newspaper coverage of

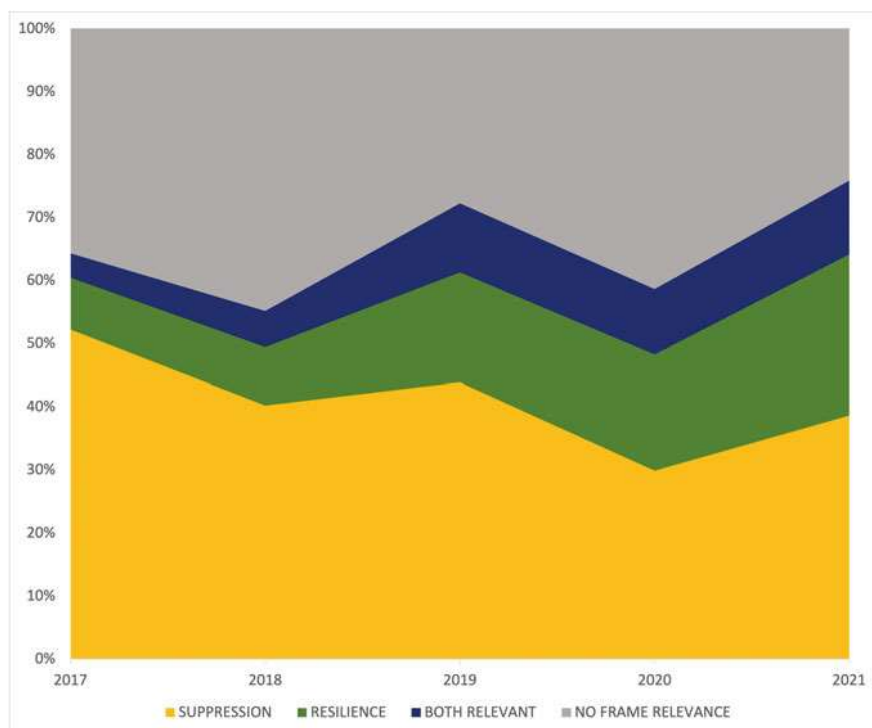


Fig. 2 Framing prevalence of wildfires 2017–2021 ($n = 656$)

fires. Resilience stories are demanding in terms of sources, length, and deep coverage, whilst suppression stories are already formatted, especially during the fire season. They can even be fitted to a sort of news template which provides common features such as fire location (where), affected zone (what), works of extinction (who and how) and, after some time, the cause (why). The stories are filled with official sources such as firefighters and risk official agencies (government, police, rural agents, etc.). Resilience, however, struggles to be formatted; it is a different media genre narrative and requires different sources such as experts and scientists. Resilience is a reflective frame, using concepts that people (and journalists) are still not used to. Therefore, it requires more experienced storytellers.

Figure 3 shows the sources of the suppression and resilience frames. For the first, the main marker and device is “Fighting and extinction”. The language of these stories is filled with lexical choices belonging to the realm of war. The metaphor FIRE-FIGHTING IS A WAR is quite clear, although the specific term “war” is avoided and replaced by its language: “fighting” (*lucha*), “combat” (*combate*), “flank” (*flancho*), “attack” (*atacar*), “ammunition dump” (*polvorín*) are all commonly used. So we take for granted the army to fight this war; they are the firefighters and also the UME (Unidad Militar de Emergencias), a special corps of the Spanish Armed Forces that are frequently mobilized in the event of wildfires. When we examine the resilience

frame, we notice a more complex system of lexical families. Data show that if the stories about fighting and extinction are dominant in the suppression frame, resilience stories tend to focus on the “Structural causation” of fires. Resilience is, above all, a story about the complexities of fires, their deeper causes, and how we should acknowledge and adapt to the reality that they are part of our environment.

The suppression frame has potentialities that are more connected with media logic and rationales. The focus on the spectacular nature of fires, drama or tragedy, criminal prosecution and firefighting challenges belong to the newscasting style. However, in

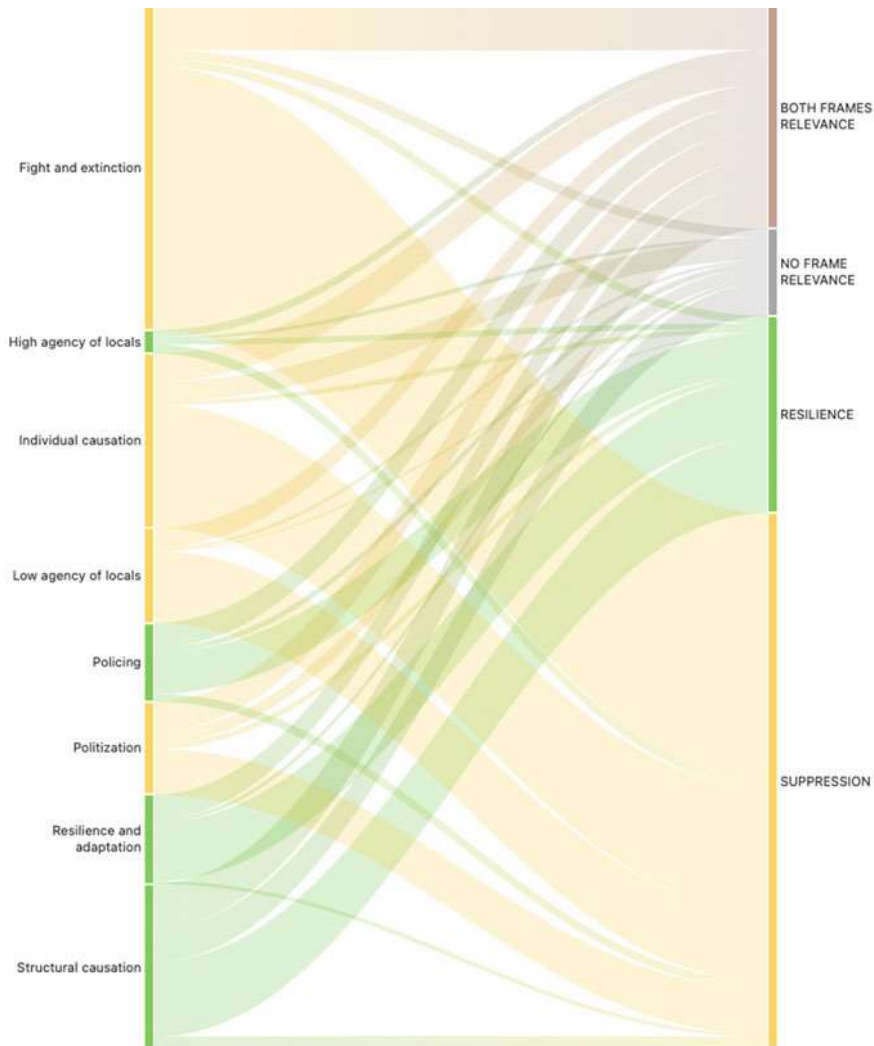


Fig. 3 Sources of frames 2017–2021

people such as Marc Castellnou or Alejandro García (2018; Hernández, 2017) made important statements in *El País*. In their story, the paradox was clear: the more effort Spain made in terms of suppression, the more problems the country would face in the future. They both lamented that the authorities were investing in extinction, just when a new strategy was needed. Their discourse used the concept of resilience in its clearest form. However, the media only replicated this message reluctantly through the voice of experts or, very rarely, scientists. Since 2017, the resilience frame has been maturing its message, sometimes putting the focus on prescribed burns. Here, Marc Castellnou developed a metaphor that consisted of the analogy (LOW INTENSITY) FIRES ARE A VACCINE FOR MEGAFIRES (Carranco, 2017; Sáez, 2017). However, this readily understood rhetorical figure was not very successful in subsequent reporting, even when Covid-19 played havoc with journalism agendas in 2021. Although the analogy articulated the narrative of huge fires as an illness that could be treated with prescriptive fires (amongst other measures), it was still too advanced for the media focus on suppression.

This message contrasted with the still overwhelming presence of politicians talking after fires and promising aid for farmers and affected communities or a firm hand against the arsonists and criminals behind the fires. This was along the same lines as the suppression frame in which policies are seen as palliative and mostly associated with recovering from tragedy and loss. In this respect, the notion of financial aid is common. Affected communities claiming aid, or politicians going to the affected regions and discussing aid packages, were part of the suppression frame. This discourse had local communities playing the role of victims and, though demanding improvements, in a rather passive position. Here, the focus on the human drama, which is also triggered by the mediatization of wildfires, can activate human empathy in readers but not necessarily gives agency to the victims. The agency of locals is other of the unresolved aspects of the resilience frame. In the discourse of suppression, it is very clear: locals are affected, and they are evacuated, helped, and must be protected. However, it would be desirable and expected to notice greater agency in the resilience frame and read stories of communities preparing their properties, organizing meetings with policymakers and explaining how they protect themselves (or authorities promoting this). These elements are almost completely unnoticed in the stories. The agency of the local people needs to be further developed in the future of the resilience frame storytelling. Surprisingly, the suppression frame appropriated this gap and colonized the device of high agency of locals. Although coloured green (Fig. 3), it is the weaker element but added more to suppression than to resilience. This is because we find stories about locals helping to extinguish fires by fighting against them. To date, the suppression discourse has a major role reserved for communities: contributing to “the fight” when “the enemy” is at their door.

As well as this, some stories include the theme of rural depopulation, but this is usually articulated by experts or politicians. In the study, this issue was included under the framing device of structural causation. However, we noted that it is not a claim from the grassroots that evidences empowerment from the communities. Sometimes “the rural” is even used politically and vindicated by all parts of the ideological spectrum. All these aspects reveal that resilience building is a political

matter, part of the realm of “policies”, whilst suppression is part of the “politization” of wildfires (political blaming, political statements after disasters, political promises of aid, disqualifications and counterstatements, etc.). Paradoxically, this sort of media politization, which is part and consequence of mediatization processes, depoliticizes wildfires.

4.3 Elements of Mediatization

The resilience frame gained momentum during the period analysed thanks to the process of wildfire mediatization. From the “mediatized sources” involved in wildfire communication, we made a list of the agents who were profiling the frame throughout the analysed period. Some of the sources are from the emergency services (fire-fighting bodies, civil protection). These, and local people closer to affected areas, are promoters of the suppression frame. But for the resilience frame, we tagged other sorts of sources, such as experts and scientists, institutions, and universities, some of which are specialized centres or sections of official bodies. There was some correlation between the presence of these sources and the presence of the resilience frame: they use a certain type of language, articulate particular arguments and offer complexities and background. This is a salient result that explains why resilience stories are gaining space within the media: there is a greater presence of specialized sources replicating a different discourse. Also, this would problematize the idea that resilience is a narrative coming from the grassroots, it is not (at least in the media), but this is a matter that I do not have space to properly discuss here.

More sources of this type would lead us to expect still more stories within the resilience frame. And this is a challenge: the resilience frame does not readily adapt to media logic and mediatization processes. As said, suppression stories are about emergency, action and drama: they tell of firefighters attacking the front, people having to leave their homes and authorities sending more forces. The information and drama fit the media requirements perfectly. However, explanations from experts and scientists are of a different ilk. They need to be modelled and adapted. Mediatization of experts and technical staff could have a better role in wildfire stories when deployed at the right time, delivered within attractive formats and pictures and used easy-to-read metaphor and language. However, the process can also lead to simplification. These ideas are connected with Plana’s (2011) consideration of the challenges that experts face to connect with non-specialized publics and the media. Ultimately, they present a cross-current narrative: they try to explain that extinction is not so effective, and they adopt discourses on “good fires” and focus not on flames but on soils, not on the evil arsonists but on the lonely farmer, not on the villagers tragedy but on rural abandonment and policies. Resilience stories are anti-climax almost by default. There is a huge task here: resilience stories are not “sexy” enough, so far, for high mediatized stories in networked times.

One of the tasks to do is to transform risk stories. Risk was tagged as a neutral element; it is a wild device. It was often found as part of the discourse of prevention;

all stories can appropriate risk. Under a functionalist perspective, media are tools for social risk awareness. The media play the role, and stories of risk are attached to both the suppression and resilience frames. They are especially active during heat waves, when the media replicate the warnings coming from the authorities, and when they inform about restrictions and even prohibitions on accessing certain areas. Thus, the risk is related to climate change and, in some stories, is a consequence of structural causalities (heat, the density of fuels, drought, firework displays, etc.).⁴ Risk is however a multifaceted frame, a sort of joker card, and media should rethink their role in mixing risk, drama and suppression stories and explore how to better articulate stories in which risk is linked to collective responsibility, effective policies and social response to fires.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

This research shows that the resilience discourse on wildfires in Spain is growing. Like all research, it has limitations. The most evident is that the analysis used a dichotomized structure within the media framing approach. It also focuses on written journalism and did not attempt to analyse visuals, despite the role they play in framing stories. Even so, it accomplished its objectives. Suppression and resilience frames are not opposed. They both use some of the frame devices that we labelled as neutral, for example, fire damage (material, environmental or human) or risk. The results are also in tune with advances in media wildfire framing, and we noted that the approach depended on the “disaster timeline” (“frame changing”) (Crow et al., 2017a, 2017b; Houston et al., 2012). We could even mention that the suppression frame is closer to what the framing literature refers to as an episodic frame (Gamson et al., 1992; Iyengar, 1991), in our case, attached to the fire season.

How the media explain fires is undergoing an important change because of super-fires, or “6th generation” fires, a concept that emerged during the five years of the study. The resilience frame is a complex and reflective frame that is gaining momentum in the media, partially thanks to a process of mediatization. Part of this process has an impact on the sort of information sources that the media are using. Most of them are still official sources, as it was stated by previous research (Fabra-Crespo & Rojas-Briales, 2015; Vicente-Mariño & Delgado-Arango, 2019), and replicate suppression frames. But now, new, more specialized agents are taking their place in the Spanish media, with a different story to tell, putting the accent on resilience and technical aspects. In our study, we also identified opportunities for improvement around the agency of rural and local communities. The media should pay more attention to the role of farmers and villagers, to the structural elements of the rural contexts and its challenges (e.g. depopulation, agri-food model), as well as

⁴ Here, it is worth mentioning that in Catalonia, it is a custom to set off fireworks on Saint John’s night to celebrate the summer solstice. *La Vanguardia*, a leading newspaper in the region, emphasizes the risk almost every year to some extent or another.

to the measures to take in the territory to, as Castellnou said, “vaccinate” it against superfires. Here, we propose a rural scope on news, reports and media storytelling on wildfires.

The resilience frame must overcome many challenges if it is to become more preminent in the media, but it is difficult to predict how the discourse is going to evolve. However, one scenario is that the global warming indicators will strength its establishment and even promote its hegemony. In the field of wildfires, both resilience and suppression are being reactivated. They do not oppose each other; they feed off each other and evolve. Therefore, it is not a process of substitution. Moreover, although mainstream media are limited in terms of space, there are numerous other places in the networks and social media that are ready and waiting for more content about wildfires, new understandings and stories. Although perhaps less influential, they should not be underestimated.

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